

Alaska Marine Highway System

~Ferries vs ships / luxury vs utility~

A Short History

When the first float planes arrived in Juneau, in the mid-20s, was a game changer. They could do in a few hours what took days by boat. In 1943, Juneau had the first airport in SE, and the ALCAN and Haines Highways were completed. By the 1950s, limited ferry service was started to Haines using a day-ferry called The Chilkat. Its captain was a veteran WWII sea captain named G.D. Gitkov who started his maritime career in 1925. Their goal was to build a fleet of ferries to serve SE with connections to the ALCAN and Prince Rupert Highways. Just after statehood, they discussed two concepts: 1. Build a fleet of large sleeper ocean ferries based in Juneau or, 2. Build a fleet of mid-sized day-ferries based in towns along the main ferry route, known as the Gitkov Plan. The mid-sized day-ferries would be less expensive to build, maintain, and operate. They don't need state rooms, food service, a diner, a laundry, a bar/lounge, and one-quarter of the crew. After considerable research, they designed a 150 ft, 100-passenger, 20-car, drive-through ferry that was sea-worthy for SE condition, that could be built for \$780,000 each. Regardless of being warned about getting in over their heads, Juneau chose the sleeper ocean ferries and ordered two 408 ft, one 352 ft, and one 300 ft ferry. In the early 70s, they expanded service to Seattle with another 400 ft, luxury, ocean ferry, The Wickersham, but because of the Jones Act, it had to be sold and replaced with a new 418 ft, 500-passenger, 294-berth, ocean ferry, The Columbia.

A Crisis with A Solution

Only the Bellingham run is susceptible to ocean conditions. By the early 70s, the CAB was reorganizing the airlines for jetliners. After a series of state airline mergers, the feds agreed to build jetports throughout SE. Ketchikan got the first jetliner in 1973, followed by twice daily jet service throughout SE, except Haines. As important as jet service is to SE, AMHS ferry service is just as important. But since its inception it has been a financial debacle, starting with the four large ocean luxury ferries, when four mid-sized day ferries were all that was required. As was warned, it's now a crisis and the AMHS needs to be downsized, depoliticized, reorganized, and modernized.

1. Down-sizing means using the Aurora, LaConte, Tazlina, and Hubbard mid-size day ferries.
2. Depoliticizing means removing Juneau as the ferry hub.
3. Reorganizing means basing The LaConte in Haines, The Tazlina in Juneau, The Aurora in Wrangell, and The Hubbard in Ketchikan.
4. Modernizing means ending some runs, rerouting others, and reviving the 40-year-old dream of connecting central SE to the Cassiar Highway.

Three interior river routes qualified but the Stikine and Unuk became designated wilderness areas, leaving the Bradfield River. It's actually the best location using ferries between Ketchikan and Wrangell and is only 21 miles from the border at the end of Bradfield Canal, an ideal ferry dock site. The plan is to have the morning Ketchikan and Wrangell ferries meet at the Bradfield dock at noon, five days a week to pick up, drop off, and exchange travelers using the Cassiar Highway connection at Bradfield. From there it's an hour and a half drive back to the Cassiar Highway, a two-hour ferry ride to Wrangell/Petersburg, and a five-hour ferry ride back to Ketchikan. Or, using two tanks full of gas, it's a two-day drive to

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Bellingham. In comparison, if you ship a 14 ft car by ferry from Bellingham to Wrangell, it costs \$3,200. It would also be a two-day drive to Anchorage or Fairbanks. The possibilities are endless.

*More benefits:

1. Using Bradfield would end using Prince Rupert.
2. Using Blind Slough would end using the Wrangell Narrows.
3. Using Berners Bay would end using Auke Bay.
4. This would enable the Haines ferry to do two roundtrips to Berners Bay.
5. And would enable Haines folks to reach Juneau by noon and Juneau folks to reach Haines by afternoon.
6. Since the N. Juneau Highway is a dead issue, those funds should be used to build the Cassiar Highway connection.
7. Being home every night is important for the ferry crews.
8. Fuel costs and crew costs are two of the ferry's biggest expenses, fixing these could save, along with modernizing, the AMHS.
9. Annual sleeper ferry crew of 179 = 21.4 million dollars. Annual day ferry crew of 76 = 9.5 million dollars.
10. LaConte based in Haines serves Juneau via Berners Bay one to two roundtrips per day, and two roundtrips per week to Skagway.
11. Tazlina based in Juneau serves Petersburg five days per week and Sitka once every two weeks.
12. Aurora based in Wrangell serves Cassiar once a day five days a week, Coffman Cove once a week, and Petersburg via Blind Slough twice a day.
13. Hubbard based in Ketchikan serves Cassiar once a day five days a week.

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NOTE: THIS PROPOSAL IS A MODERN DAY VERSION PROPOSED BY ALASKAS PREEMINENT SHIP CAPTAIN G. DAVID GITKOF IN 1957.

4-Day-Ferries Employee Costs

Aurora Crew 24	Captain	-1	\$190,000	= \$190,000.00
	First Mate	-1	\$180,000	= \$180,000.00
	Engineer	-2	\$181,000	= \$362,000.00
	I.B.U.	-21	\$115,000	= \$241,500.00
	TOTAL:			= \$2,966,000.00
LaConte Crew 24	Captain	-1	\$190,000	= \$190,000.00
	First Mate	-1	\$180,000	= \$180,000.00
	Engineer	-1	\$181,000	= \$181,000.00
	I.B.U.	-21	\$115,000	= \$2,415,000.00
	TOTAL:			= \$2,966,000.00
Tazlina Crew 14	Captain	-1	\$190,000	= \$190,000.00
	First Mate	-1	\$180,000	= \$180,000.00
	Engineer	-1	\$181,000	= \$181,000.00
	I.B.U.	-11	\$115,000	= \$1,265,000.00
	TOTAL:			= \$1,816,000.00
Hubbard Crew 14	Captain	-1	\$190,000	= \$190,000.00
	First Mate	-1	\$180,000	= \$180,000.00
	Engineer	-1	\$181,000	= \$181,000.00
	I.B.U.	-11	\$115,000	= \$1,265,000.00
	TOTAL:			= \$1,816,000.00
Total Employees	= 76	Total Costs:		= \$9,564,000.00

NOTE: Employees return home daily.

Four Original Sleeper Ferry Employee Costs
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Matanuska	Captain	@	\$190,000 x1	= \$190,000.00
Crew 50	First Mate	@	\$180,000 x1	= \$180,000.00
	Engineer	@	\$181,000 x1	= \$181,000.00
	I.B.U.	@	\$115,000 x47	= \$5,405,000.00
	TOTAL:			= \$5,956,000.00
Malaspina	Captain	@	\$190,000 x1	= \$190,000.00
Crew 50	First Mate	@	\$180,000 x1	= \$180,000.00
	Engineer	@	\$181,000 x1	= \$181,000.00
	I.B.U.	@	\$115,000 x47	= \$5,405,000.00
	TOTAL:			= \$5,956,000.00
Taku	Captain	@	\$190,000 x1	= \$190,000.00
Crew 42	First Mate	@	\$180,000 x1	= \$180,000.00
	Engineer	@	\$181,000 x1	= \$181,000.00
	I.B.U.	@	\$115,000 x39	= \$4,485,000.00
	TOTAL:			= \$5,036,000.00
Tustumena	Captain	@	\$190,000 x1	= \$190,000.00
Crew 37	First Mate	@	\$180,000 x1	= \$180,000.00
	Engineer	@	\$181,000 x1	= \$181,000.00
	I.B.U.	@	\$115,000 x34	= \$3,910,000.00
	TOTAL:			= \$4,461,000.00
Total				
Employees	= 179	Total Cost		= \$21,409,000.00

NOTE: CREW COSTS INCLUDE MED, RETIREMENT, INSURANCE,

G. David Gitkov

After attending National Navigation School in LeHavre (France), G. David Gitkov went to sea, starting his long maritime career in 1925. He sailed the Atlantic, Mediterranean, Caribbean, and Pacific on freighters. At the beginning of WWII, he sailed as an officer in the Free French Naval Forces on a submarine escort and later a motor launch. When the United States entered the war officially, he returned home. Gitkov then sailed on U.S. Army Seagoing Tugs and later troopships to Alaska and the South Pacific. During the war, he was promoted to Captain G. David Gitkov, United States Maritime Service/Commander—an unlimited master's license excluding submarines and tankers; Gitkov also had pilot licenses for Southeast Alaska; Puget Sound, Kuskokwim, and other places!. He fell in love with Alaska, "the last frontier." So, in 1947 he moved his family to Aniak (Alaska), where he plied the Kuskokwim River and the Bering Sea with various vessels. In 1952, Gitkovs moved to Juneau, and he sailed as captain and operator on the MV *Chilkoot* "ferry" from Tee Harbor (Juneau) to Port Chilkoot (Haines) and Skagway; then the MV *Chilkat* 1957 to 1962.

When the Territory of Alaska, later the State of Alaska, started talks of a "Marine Highway" around 1957, Captian Gitkov did a lot of research and proposed a ferry system [ferry is a ship for conveying passengers and goods, especially over a relatively short distance and as a regular service]. Gitkov felt Alaska taxpayers could afford "his system" and it would meet the needs of Southeast Alaskans. He was not a politician, and Alaska ended up with a fleet of ocean-going ships that ran from Prince Rupert (Canada), Seattle, and later Bellingham (Washington) to Skagway. Although Captain Gitkov was more than qualified to run the "ferries," he decided to move to the Caribbean, where he sailed for many more years.

His heart remained in Alaska!